

The Donner Summit

Heirloom



History and stories of the Donner Summit Historical Society

March, 2020 issue #139

Ski Advice from 1935

In [Ski Heil Magazine's](#) February, 1935 edition Joel Hildebrand wrote about the the beginning of the Sierra Club's lodge, Clair Tappaan, at Norden and gave advice for skiers and prospective skiers. This article is adapted from Hildebrand's article and is really about the state of skiing in 1935, in the days before downhill skiing.

For more about the history of Clair Tappaan see the April and May, 2017 issues of the [Heirloom](#) in articles by Kimberly Roberts of the University of Nevada at Reno.

FEBRUARY, 1935

SKI HEIL!

BY JOEL H. HILDEBRAND

CARTOONS BY MILTON HILDEBRAND

The Sierra Club is in the process of making a number of notable discoveries: that its beloved Sierra is the Sierra Nevada, or snowy range, and must be sought by devoted pilgrims not only in July, but also in January, to be known in the fullness of its glory; that winter at high altitudes is not bitter, but is warm and friendly, for the thin air easily transmits the radiance of the sun to bare brown backs; that twelve feet of snow affords a smoother path than even a national park trail, and runs anywhere you wish to go; that the purple shadows of the trees and the pure rose of the alpenglow are colors as rich as those of columbine and heather; that the smooth folds of sparkling virgin snow, the glitter of icicles, and the living green of firs showing beneath their heavy white mantles-all constitute an enchanted world which can be entered by the magic of the ski.

The delighted few who first made these discoveries have spread the gospel, for one simply cannot help telling it to others, till the converts are gathering like the children who followed the Pied Piper. They will disappear into the mountain, too, but not permanently, for each will quickly emerge, laugh and be laughed at, brush off the snow and try again.

Up until now "northern devotees" of snow sports have "been homeless wanderers, sponging on the hospitable Auburn Ski Club, renting Boy Scout camp, or sleeping like tramps in the abandoned railroad-station at Soda Springs."

In February 1934 a bus was hired for a trip to Soda Springs and Norden. Passengers paid \$3.50 round trip. Food cost so little "The whole trip was almost cheaper than staying at home." The skiing was fine but it was the trip home that changed local

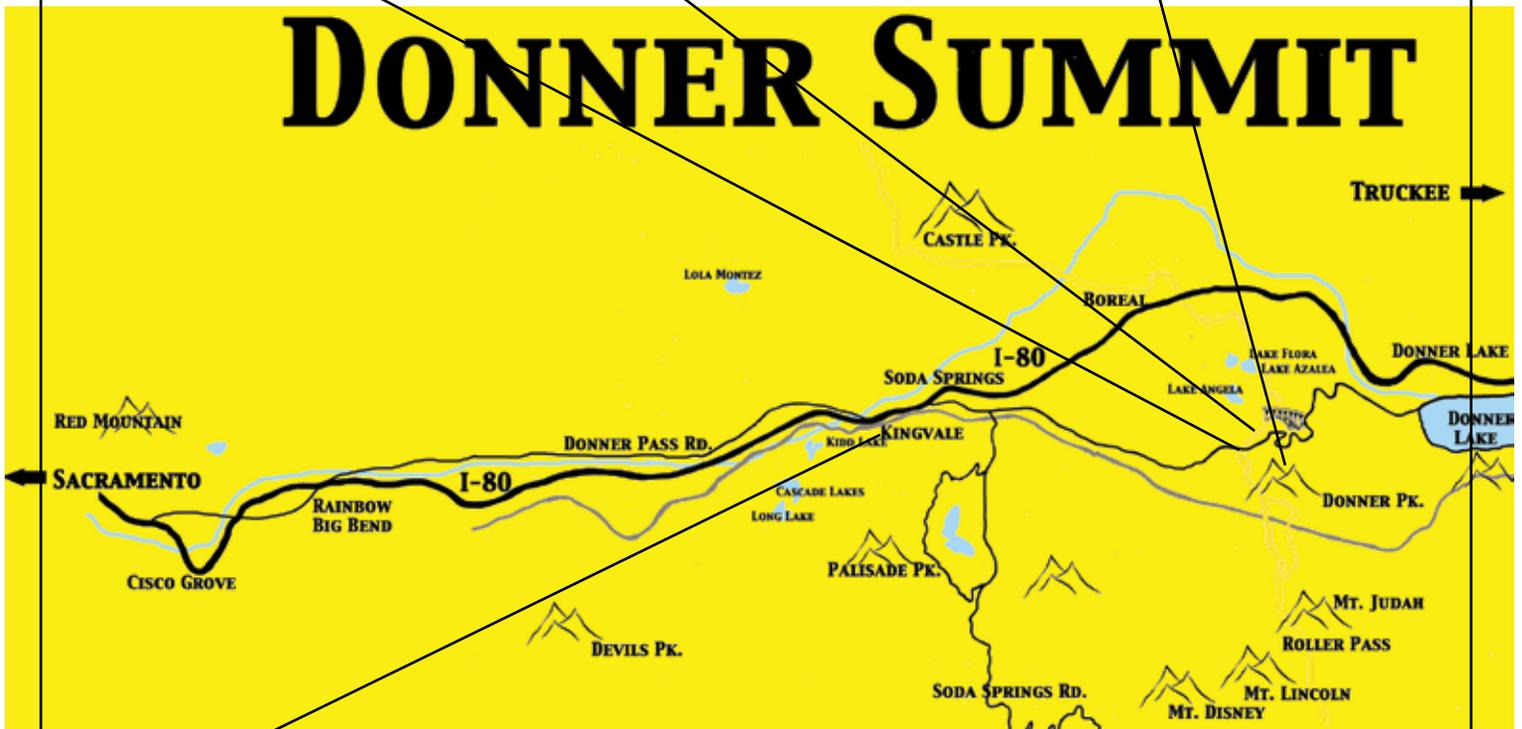


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Clair Tappaan Lodge today

history. They talked of skiing, technique, and equipment of course but the most lasting subject was “where to spend the night on future trips. The obvious answer was a ski-lodge, owned and operated by the Sierra Club, and the Clair Tappaan Memorial Lodge” started to take shape in their minds. Walter Ratcliff, an architect, had already designed the Sierra Ski Club Lodge at Norden (now Hutchinson Lodge) and he offered his services.

Norden was chosen because it is on the railroad line and the Lincoln Highway, which by then was U.S. 40 and was kept open all winter, there was a post office, a store, and a public garage. Snow conditions were good too, “It lies at an altitude of 7000 feet and has one of the heaviest packs of snow in the United States; twelve feet is normal in February and twenty-seven feet is on record - plenty to fall in.”

“Norden is only a mile west of the main crest of the Sierra Nevada. Ideal skiing slopes lie in every direction. Four miles to the north stands Castle Peak, a massive, palisaded mountain 9140 feet high, and three miles to the south is Mount Lincoln, 8400 feet, whose north side encloses the "Sugar Bowl," (which in four years would become Sugar Bowl ski area) a smooth, shaded cirque surmounted by fine pinnacles and collecting enough snow to last through June. The forest is open, and there are many slopes, with but few obstacles to fast running. A magnificent course with a thousand-foot drop in altitude has been discovered, down the slopes of Mount Lincoln. Two of our skiers ran it in five and a half minutes last March in un-tracked snow.” A lease had been obtained from the Forest Service as well. Permission was granted to cut trees. People started to contribute money. The Sierra Club voted money for the project. Fixtures were donated. Fund raisers were held. Workers were rounded up as were “girls to cook for them” [life was different in those days for the “girls.”] Every weekend all spring and summer workers traveled to the summit to work.

By the time of Hildebrand's article the lodge was a reality only waiting for a permanent roof the next year. Meanwhile lots of people had signed up to use the lodge and there were plans to add to the facility.

Ski Heil

The winter greeting in the Alps is "Ski-heil." Heil means health and happiness; it means long life and good luck; it means wholesomeness. The ski-runner knows that only on skis can these be realized in their fullness. Come to the mountains! To the Sierra Nevada, where the air is crisp and the sun is bright, where the only depressions are those that one takes with a flourish and whoop! Strap on your skis and shout with us, "Ski-heil"!

Skiing Badges

In order to take “full advantage of the facilities” skiing proficiency was a necessity and so the Sierra Club “adopted the official test of the British Ski Club.” There were three classes of badges. The first was for winners of international races. The second was very severe and not many would qualify.

The third class would be earned by a “rather good skier, well equipped for all ordinary touring” (this was not the age of downhill skiing yet.) “To earn it one must demonstrate climbing ability and stamina, telemarks, christianas, and continuous stem-turns on a gradient of 15 degrees, and run down



a standard 1000-foot course within a fixed time limit, usually about seven minutes, but varying with snow conditions.”

Then to encourage beginners a fourth class was established. It was “designed to demonstrate ability to join in an easy tour without likelihood of having to be carried home. The fourth-class skier must ascend and descend 500 feet within specific time limits. He must demonstrate kick-turns, four successive stem-turns, a snow-plow to a stand-still and a short, straight run.”



The club’s philosophy was, “It should be the ambition of everyone to pass at least the third-class test. The satisfactions of skiing confidently under control are very great. Do not emulate those who go wildly down a steep slope out of control, waving arms and legs madly, holding poles so that a fall threatens impalement, only to crash to a mass of wreckage long before reaching the bottom.

No one who can use his legs should fear to try skiing. The first couple of days are very awkward, for one’s natural reflexes are of little use and a new set must be acquired; but this need not take long, and it begins to be fun very soon. It is fun for those who watch you, right from the start.

Equipment and Clothing Advice

Hildebrand had “seen people trying to learn on skis a foot too long, with soft moccasin-toed boots that wobble about in the bindings so that the skis cannot possibly be guided. It cannot be done in that way. One simply must have proper boots and bindings, with skis of the right length. It will pay, in the long run, to buy real ski-boots with stout soles and square, hard toes. They are not cheap, but will last a lifetime, and the satisfaction one gets from them will justify cutting down on some expensive vice in order to own a pair.

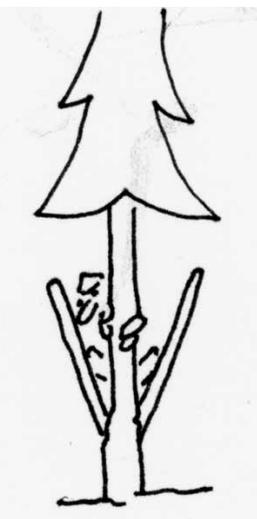
Joel Hildebrand was a chemistry professor and dean at the University of California at Berkeley, U.S. winter Olympic team manager, president of the Sierra Club, charter member of the Auburn Ski Club, and a founder of Clair Tappaan Lodge. Hildebrand Hall at U.C. Berkeley is named for Dr. Hildebrand.

“They should be big enough to permit two pairs of heavy wool socks; and still allow you to wiggle your toes. Do not drench them with oil, but wax them a couple of times a season. Keep them on lasts when not in use.

“The skis should be of ash or, better, hickory, and not longer than from the floor to the palm of the upstretched hand. The grain should be either vertical or else strictly horizontal throughout. Bindings should fit the boot perfectly, permitting no side-play of the heel, but allowing it to be lifted freely far enough to kneel on the ski. Bindings with toe-straps are easier on the boots, and far more practical than those which clamp the sole. ... You will need a pair of ski-sticks, also canvas mittens and woolen mittens to wear under them when the sun does not shine. Provide yourself with four kinds of ski-wax: for cold dry snow, for wet snow, for crust, and for "corn-snow," which is coarse, granular spring-snow. The purpose of wax is to enable one to slide downhill freely without sticking, and yet to climb up-hill with sufficient sticking to prevent back-slip.



“...A small cake of paraffin is useful if the other waxes have not prevented the adherence of snow to the skis. Trousers may be either knee-breeches or long trousers, of the Norwegian type, tied at the ankle. Riding trousers do not allow enough knee-room. In either case they should be of wool, closely knit, with smooth finish. Light waterproofing is advisable. Do not bundle yourself in heavy underwear, for skiing is often hot work. Wear a light flannel shirt and depend on sweater and wind-jacket, carried along in your rucksack, for protection against cold on an exposed ridge or in the late afternoon. Your cap or hat should furnish generous protection against the sun; but provide yourself in addition with goggles and theatrical grease-paint. This last is far superior in effectiveness and sticking quality to other face-dopes. The burning power of sunlight in snow at 8000 feet in March cannot be overestimated.



“Always take your rucksack if you are going more than a mile from the lodge. Put into it your sweater, wind-jacket, woolen mittens, wax, a couple of straps, lunch, a can of tomato-juice, first-aid for yourself and skis, flashlight, and matches. An aluminum ski-tip may prevent your being marooned miles from home.



Safety Advice

“Never go off alone. An accident which may be only a minor one to a member of a party becomes a major one to a lone skier.

“Each party should have a responsible leader and a rounder-up, and noses should be counted at intervals. Do not court danger; if not for your own sake, at least as a courtesy to others, for injury to either you or your skis makes you a nuisance. Learn something about avalanches, and avoid a possible avalanche slope as you would the plague. Every slope of 25 degrees or more is dangerous after a new fall of powder snow; also when the snow is very wet.

Final Advice

“Do not allow yourself to be deterred by the dangers of skiing. These can be minimized by knowledge and judgment so that they are no more serious than the hazards of motoring, which deter no one.

“I would urge our ardent mountain climbers to restrain their ambitions to climb peaks in winter till they have learned to ski. One should be ashamed to make a long descent by 'sitzmarking' at every turn when it should be possible to run down under control in a beautiful series of christianias or telemarks. To one who has learned to ski, it is this, not the mountain-peak, that is the greater glory.

History

Clair Tappaan Lodge was hand built by a hearty group of Sierra Club volunteers in 1934 as a retreat for hikers, skiers and mountain climbers. This rustic building, consisting of post and beam construction, was designed by Walter Ratcliff, a noted Berkeley architect and member of the Sierra Club. The superstructure of the lodge consists of large vertical logs with a rough-sawn beam roof structure from timber felled on the site. Volunteers expand of the building several times and maintain it today.

The lodge is named after Sierra Club President and Supreme Court Judge Clair Tappaan.

A Good Story

Neil Robinson was seven years old when Clair Tappaan Lodge was built. His job was to stand on the running board of an old Ford truck (right) and relay requests for the vehicle to move in order to raise the beams. There is a video of the bare-chested young man building the lodge with hand saws and hammers which can be viewed on the lodge website <http://ctl.sierraclub.org>

Things to do right here

You can enter the building and view the enormous timbers (above) used in the initial construction. The core library has a display of historic photos, books of Donner Summit history, and early-day visitor's logs.

The friendly, casual atmosphere and affordable nightly rates (including family-style meals) make the lodge the perfect rustic getaway and a charming spot from which to explore the riches of the Sierra Nevada.

In summer, the recreational opportunities are unlimited. A network of nearby trails offers miles of hiking and provides access to remote meadows and peaks, crystal clear lakes and numerous fishing streams. The well-known Pacific Crest Trail is only a mile away. The Donner Summit area is great for both road and mountain biking. It is also widely known as a rock climbers' mecca.

The area receives the highest average snowfall of the entire Sierra Nevada range, making the lodge a favorite with cross-country ski and snowshoe enthusiasts. In winter you can rent skis or snowshoes to explore the many groomed trails, take weekend classes, or sled on the hill behind the lodge.

This sign sponsored by Clair Tappaan Lodge and the Sierra Club

(caption) here top: contemporary picture of the main building; middle and bottom: original newspaper picture and 1934's photo in front of Clark Peak. The book and video photographs are from the Clair Tappaan pamphlet. copyright 2010 Donner Summit Historical Society www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org

The [Ski Heil](#) article from which this was written came from long time subscriber Chuck Oldenburg in November, 2017. There's just so much Donner Summit history vying for inclusion in the [Heirloom](#) that much has to wait its turn.



Crazy or What?!

Our February [Heirloom](#) had one of our "What's in Your Closet?" stories about a 1915 trip over Donner Summit by Leon Chamberlain. At the end of the article, by Rich Chamberlain, there was a note that the Stanley Steamer had participated in one of the annual races of automobiles over Donner Summit. Contestants were aiming to be the first to cross the mountains each spring. Who could be first to conquer the melting snow? Leon didn't win because he did not know about the tricks that veteran racers employed. Rich Chamberlain said,

"this race had been an annual event for several years and many of the participants knew tricks and techniques to help them over patches of snow. Some of those entered in the race carried large planks of wood in their cars to place on top of the snow. Other drivers had winches and apparatus that enabled them to get their cars on top of the snow sheds for the trains."

You can see the kind of thing Rich is talking about if you go to the June, '19 [Heirloom](#) for the story of Arthur Foote in 1911 who did win that year (see also the [Heirlooms](#) for July, '14 and June, '15).

Looking at the pictures on these two pages or in the [Heirlooms](#) listed above you can get an idea of the difficulty of being the first or even just an early crosser of Donner Summit. What would induce someone to attempt such an "adventure?"

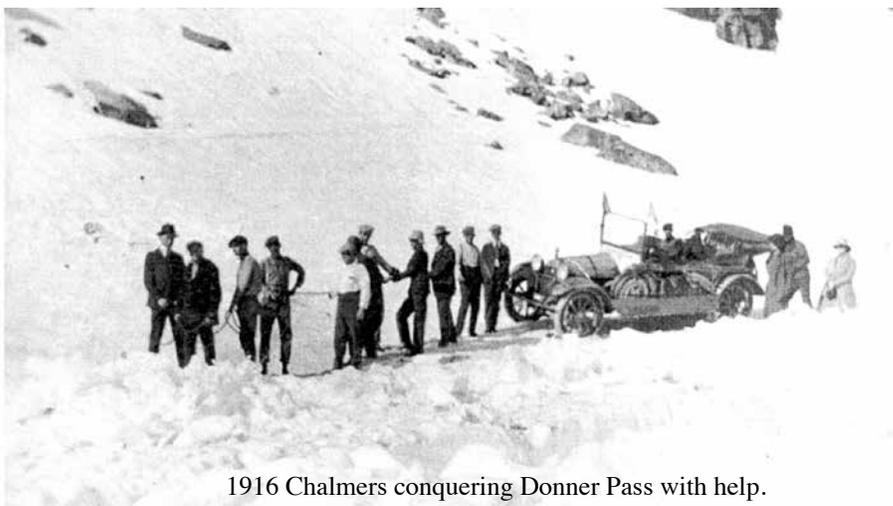
First let's deal with who was encouraging this sort of thing. Snow is a problem on Donner Summit and closed off automobile travel for months each winter and spring until the State started clearing the highway in 1932. Merchants in Tahoe and Truckee and beyond were interested in getting summer tourism going as soon as possible. They held snow shoveling bees and hired snow shovelers to dig trenches to expose more surface area to speed melting. They collected ashes to spread on the snow (see examples on page 8) and they spread salt. In the early 20th Century the Tahoe Tavern held an annual silver cup race which attracted contestants, but more importantly attracted publicity for travel. There were newspaper articles that reported on the state of the roads and when they would be officially opened which also garnered interest.

Then there were the early automobile manufacturers and dealers. They wanted the publicity of their automobiles being the first over the summit and down to Lake Tahoe. Showing the ruggedness should increase sales. The auto parts manufacturers joined in too touting that their tires, for example, that helped the winning automobile to first place. Early 20th Century newspaper articles carried titles like, "Buick Auto First Over Sierra Road" (1917 - the driver, a Mr. McGee, had been in the race a couple of times), "Overland Bests Mud in Run to Lake Tahoe (1913), "Tiny Maxwell Car Wins Tahoe Cup (1911), "Little Ford Wins Tahoe Cup" (1911). (Despite the conflict in 1911 those are accurate dates for articles.)

The newspapers dutifully reported on the race winners and other attempts to cross the Sierra. No doubt those kinds of stories about that new thing, the automobile, increased circulation. The catchy titles no doubt attracted readers, "Plucky Buick Pilot Returning After Completing Dangerous



Above, the Chamberlain Stanley Steamer near Donner Summit in 1914 on another trip through the snow.



1916 Chalmers conquering Donner Pass with help.

Trip" (1912), "Plow Through Snow Drifts Near Summit" (1917), "White Mantle Covering Crest of Sierra Mountains Fails as Barrier to Progress of Sturdy Touring Car" (1912, "Auto Stalled by Snow in Sierra" (1910 - The driver and friends got stuck and walked to the summit. So the attempt to be the first auto was a failure. The article went on to say they could have shoveled their way out but were in a rush to get home and so did not do that. Apparently they left the car in the snow?)

Then we've got to address the drivers. Why did they attempt the crazy adventures? Many no doubt did not know any better about what the conditions really were. Arthur Foote, who won the 1911 race for the Tahoe Tavern silver cup (in a Ford) went back to Nevada City to get more equipment so he could continue. People also didn't believe the amount of snow on the summit or how slowly it melts. In 1884 Thomas Stevens rode his bicycle across the Sierra leaving San Francisco in the spring. He had no idea there would be so much snow and ended up crossing through the snow sheds. George Wyman did the same thing in 1902. He'd also left San Francisco in the late spring and did not know there would be so much snow. Alexander Winton and his driver did likewise in 1901, also having left San Francisco in the spring driving their Winton automobile. They didn't go through the snowsheds however. They went over them.

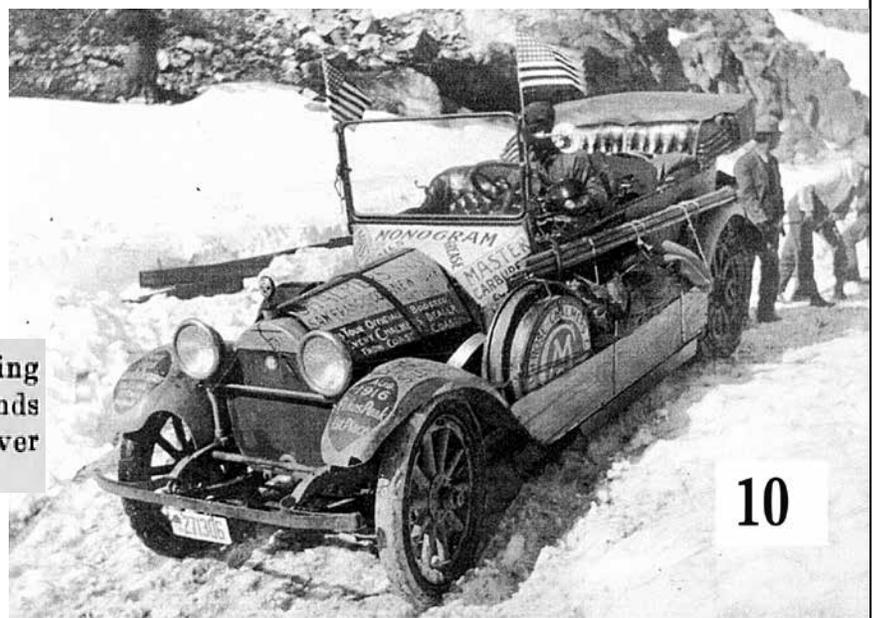
What would induce a man (they were all men in this endeavor although there were women "Transcontinentalists" - See "Women Crossed Donner Summit Too" in the March, '16 [Heirloom](#)). Clearly some at least didn't know what they were getting into. Most, though probably did know. The journey today is measured in hours in sealed automobiles. In the early 20th Century the journey could be weeks in the early season. The automobiles didn't even have tops and so the participants were at the mercy of the elements. They had to sleep outside because there were few lodgings. It was best to travel at first light while the snow was still frozen so tires didn't sink, and so it was cold out. There was a lot of physical exertion. There was a lot of digging. There was a lot of heaving and sweating using winches and pushing. Some, as Rich Chamberlain's article notes, carried boards. Lay the boards down. Drive over them. Lay another set of boards, drive over those and remove the first boards. Step by Step over the snow. Others carried canvas which did the same thing.

All of that to conquer the Sierra and be the first for the season. There were bragging rights no doubt and for some years there was a Tahoe Tavern silver cup.

Then there is testosterone. These were all guys with new toys. How far could the new transportation, the automobile, go? Newspapers reported on endurance runs and races. Donner Summit wasn't unique. And testosterone encourages guys to do things just because they can. Arthur Foote's 1911 expedition was because of a bet.



Unidentified "autoists" crossing on top of the Donner Summit snowsheds. When the snow covered the barn doors that allowed vehicles to cross the tracks by going through the sheds, or later the snow covered the underpass, this was the only alternative to waiting for snow melt.



10

The citizens of Truckee are planning an entertainment to help raise funds to hasten the opening of the road over the summit.

i.e. raising money to fund snow clearing over Donner Summit

Santa Cruz Evening News June 8, 1917

Here's the Chalmers again. Note the guys on ropes in the back



Arthur Foote "driving" over the snow to his Tahoe Tavern win in 1911.

Buick
LEADS AGAIN

On Last Tuesday, for the **THIRD CONSECUTIVE YEAR**, a **BUICK** has **WON** the much-coveted

TAHOE TAVERN TROPHY

Offered annually to the first car to master the snow-capped Sierra Nevada Mountains

UNDER ITS OWN POWER

and to reach the famous resort, via the Emigrant Gap State Highway. To win this trophy the **BUICK** was subjected to the severest imaginable test, being forced to buck deep snow and to plow through heavy drifts for a distance of 20 miles.

This test again proves the **STURDINESS OF BUICK CONSTRUCTION** and the power of the **BUICK VALVE-IN-THE-HEAD MOTOR**.

During the entire trip not an adjustment was made, and at the finish the car was running as smoothly as at the start.

When a Buick Starts It Finishes a Winner

There are Six **BUICK** models in the 1914 line, and every one is a **WINNER**.

\$1060 to \$2135 in Oakland

Howard Automobile Co.

3200-62, 61, 58, 57, Broadway, Opposite St. Mary's Chhch. Phone Lakeside 3400.

Oakland Tribune May 31, 1914

Save all Your Ashes

Save your ashes! Next spring they will be used on the roads in combating snow conditions. It is suggested that while the roads are good, these ashes could be collected late this summer and stored in convenient places along the highway where they could be easily obtained in the spring months at which time teaming is difficult, they could be more readily obtained and distributed over the snow with much less time and trouble. This means should clear the road at least one month sooner than heretofore.

Reno and other places should be interested in this undertaking.

A small monthly contribution would finance the work.

Truckee Republican May 25, 1916

San Francisco Examiner May 28, 1914

Truckee Business Men Shovel Snow in May

The business men in town started out bright and early this morning in automobiles, equipped with picks, shovels, ropes and all necessary paraphernalia for breaking roads through the snow, to break the road across the summit. Practically every businessman in town was represented, and it is thought that by tonight the road will be passable. This is the first organized effort that has been made to open the road, and a great deal of credit is due to the business men for the way they are talking hold of this matter.

This will open the route over the summit and make the roads passable over this route practically two weeks sooner than either over the Placerville grade, or through the Feather River Canyon, and adds another unsurmountable argument to the already numberless good features presented to have the Lincoln Highway goes this way.

The trip will encourage others?

"...the success of these three men in first crossing the Emigrant pass summit shows that the late winter touring afforded by the Sierras is making an appeal for the first time to private owners. Heretofore, the earliest crossings have always been made by dealers with intent of demonstrating their cars."

Leon J. Pinkston
San Francisco Call June 15, 1911

Mr. Pinkston wrote an automobile column for the Call. Here he's talking about Arthur Foote's trip.

What's in Your Closet?

Donner Summit Weather Station Ctolection

Rick Solinsky posts a lot of historic pictures on our DSHS FaceBook page for which we are grateful. He's helping spread the story of Donner Summit history and those posts attract a lot of interest.

Early in the summer of 2019 he posted a picture of the weather station that serviced the first transcontinental air route over Donner Summit. Pam Vaughan saw the weather station picture and it struck a cord in her because her father, Willard Milligan, had worked there. Better, she had pictures, and best, she wanted to share.

She sent us a CD titled, "Donner Summit Weather Station 1939-1941 Willard Ellis Milligan Pam Vaughan Bishop CA "

Pam said that her father "loved his job there in about 1939-1941 but maybe didn't enjoy the deep snow! He took lots of photos and loved camera equipment."

"Dad was Willard Ellis Milligan, and his wife was Helen (Partridge). Dad was born in 1912 and died in 2005. Mom was born in 1917 and died in 2007. They often talked about their time living in Truckee and trudging through the snow up to the weather station on Donner Summit. One of the photos shows the walking route in the snow. Apparently there was a garage [page 15] at the bottom of the hill where they could park their car. Mom related that she once was taking a berry pie up that route to the 'boys' and fell face first into the pie and the snow. They told lots of stories about living there.

"They lived by the railroad tracks [down in Truckee] in a tiny 1 bedroom house. One day a terrible smell emanated from the bathroom next door. The poor guy had died on the toilet several days previously. Yep, they told stories like that!

"Dad was a radio man and had learned Morse code and gotten his amateur radio license while still in high school in Fresno. He proceeded to join the U.S. Navy Reserve and then the Army Reserve. He then joined the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] and was working as a radioman for that federal entity when he met my mom. They married and lived in Fresno, then Sacramento and then Truckee. In August of 1941, he got a job with the State of California as a radio technician, so they left Truckee. But he always had a radio station in his yard and house after that and was sending Morse Code and CQs the day he died at the age of 92! His call letters were W6DQR.

"I've left my dad's captions from the photo album on the scanned images. Some of these, I believe are RPPCs (Real Photo PostCards), commercially produced. Amidst the photos are receivers in Fresno. These might be receivers for the weather station or perhaps they were from before Dad worked on Donner. But he seemed to always put things into sequential order.

"Claude Herrold was the boss while he was working on the summit. Another person from the photo is someone named 'Edgar.'

"Thanks for taking care of the Donner Summit history! I am a photo archivist and researcher at the Laws Museum and Historic Site in Bishop, California. I also am a history columnist for our local paper, the [Inyo Register](#).

Pam Vaughan





weather station site today - picture by George Lamson

OAKLAND-RENO AIRWAY

The Donner Summit radio range* on the Oakland-Reno airway will be located 8000 feet high astop [sic] the Sierra "hump." Airway engineers for the department of commerce have selected a site for the mountain range near the airways [sic] weather reporting station at the Summit. This range will guide flier over the Sierra on the western dvision [sic] of the transcontinental airway.

Oakland Tribune June 12, 1930

*radio broadcasting to enable pilots to find their positions using specific signals that carry identification but also values pilots could use.



"our transmitter house"



"Out of our kitchen window at the summit."



"The hiway station from the airway station."

The octagonal building used to house Division of Highways equipment and collapsed in the 1980's



"Big Shot inspectors having a snow ball fight"



To read more about the weather station or the transcontinental air route on Donner Summit, there is our 20 Mile Museum sign on the next page (on our website as well as on Donner Pass Rd. after snow melt.

Take a look too at our article and picture indices on our web site.

See the [Heirloom](#):
September 2018
July, 2011
December, 2016

There's also an exhibit on our exhibits page

IT COST FORTY BUCKS TO GET OUT
IT TOOK SEVEN MEN FOUR HOURS WITH
TWO CARS TO JERK IT OUT & BROKE THE
DODGES TRANSMISSION TO BOOT.



"Our thermometer box"

History The first wagon trains, the first transcontinental railroad, and the first transcontinental highway crossed Donner Summit. So did the first transcontinental airway.

When airplanes were new, pilots flew by the "seat of their pants," flying only when they could see. Pilots wanted to fly all the time though, and people wanted aerial, so the Federal Government developed airways and compressors improved airplanes.

The first transcontinental airway went right overhead here.

The 1920's saw great improvement in flying. Planes began to carry radios (only receivers were required initially) and guidance devices. Radio and lighted beacons went set up to guide pilots and emergency landing strips were placed at regular intervals.

To the left above you, on top of Signal Hill (the top of Donner Ski Ranch) there is still a beacon that rotated showing pilots the summit. Below the beacon more tower lights oriented east-west in the direction of the official airway. Above you to the right was airway station #15 with "SF - 34, 15" painted on one side of the roof and "Donner" on the other.

Airway stations were placed at regular intervals all the way across the country along the transcontinental route. They provided up to the minute weather information, tracked traffic and provided communication.

The station on Donner Summit was commissioned in 1931. It was decommissioned in 1952 when planes moved to more advanced technology, more powerful radio beacons, and flew higher, making the beacons irrelevant.

The Donner station was not a perfect assignment due to the winter isolation of 30 foot snowfalls. Personnel had to travel miles over the snow to get to the main station so they could go to Truckee for mail or supplies. Many hasty operators skied the whole way down to Truckee.

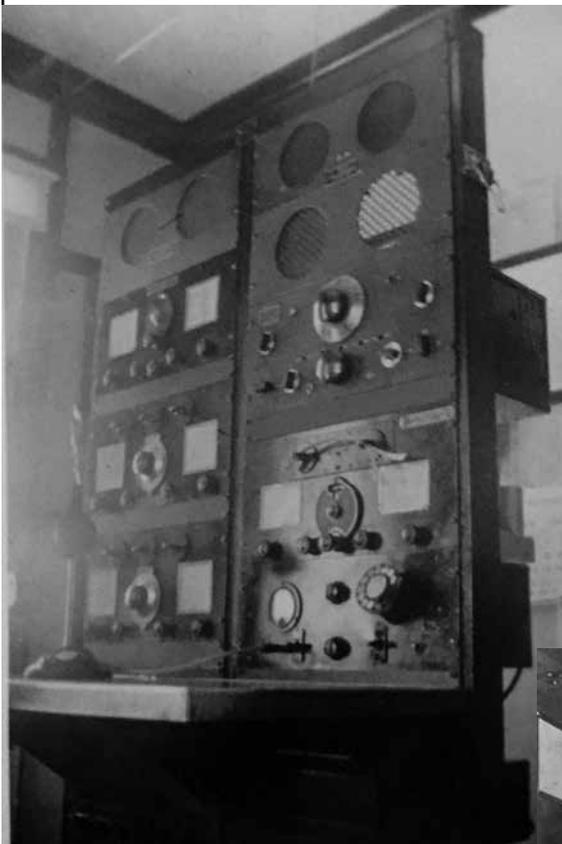
A Good Memory

"We occasionally had dinner with Marie (Fitzpatrick, pictured above in front of the station's view of Donner Lake) who was very gracious - the station... was quite cozy, which was good considering the incredible winds that hounded it. The rope line that served as a handrail was also a comfort when ascending the place. My Mom and I were sometimes a bit silly after dinner on our way down and we would start singing and laughing on those rocks, gripping the rope in time to step on from a bad fall." Pat Malberg, Lake Mary, remembering visits to the station.

Things to do right here Make your way up the rock and look for the old foundation. Hike up to Lake Mary for a picnic. Follow the Pacific Crest Trail north for lakes and great views.

This sign was sponsored by Don & Pat Malberg

One of our 20 Mile Museum signs which you can visit after snow melt and through summer and fall on Donner Pass Rd. at the top of the pass. (It's on our website too)



"Our five receivers at Donner Summit."



Our ceiling projector lamp.



not labeled



Left, "My Little Eskimo"



Left, "One of the few pictures of the boss"

Right, "A certain man with a certain woman The reason why certain operators were late to work"



"'Sparky' the Chevy & me"



Right, "What is she looking at?"



Left, "The rear of the boss"

Right, "Our Post office in the Spring with no snow" Norden Store and Ski Lodge



"Thunderstorm over the sugar bowl hill"

"6 people and none were hurt"
Presumably this car went off the edge
of Old 40 as some did from time to time
attested to by the wreckage that's still
there.



The Business end of a Snow Plow"

"When we cracked up the
Chev" Note the ski jump
in the background.





"Our garage at Donner"
Mr. Milligan took a picture of a postcard here.

TAKING SNOW PICTURES
ON DONNER SUMMIT



"The Dodge under Four Feet of Snow"



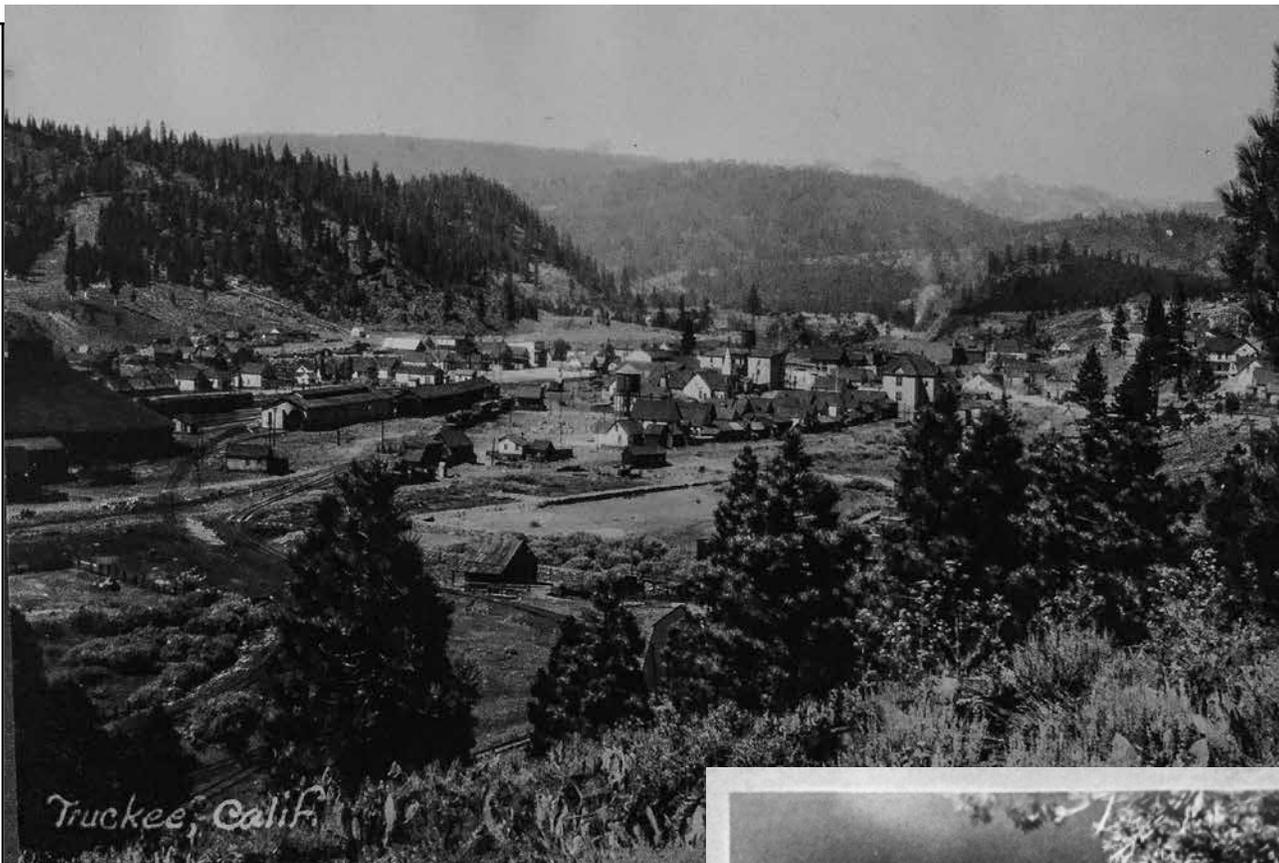
The garage, November, 2019

"Looking down the grade" also a postcard



"The Queen of Donner"

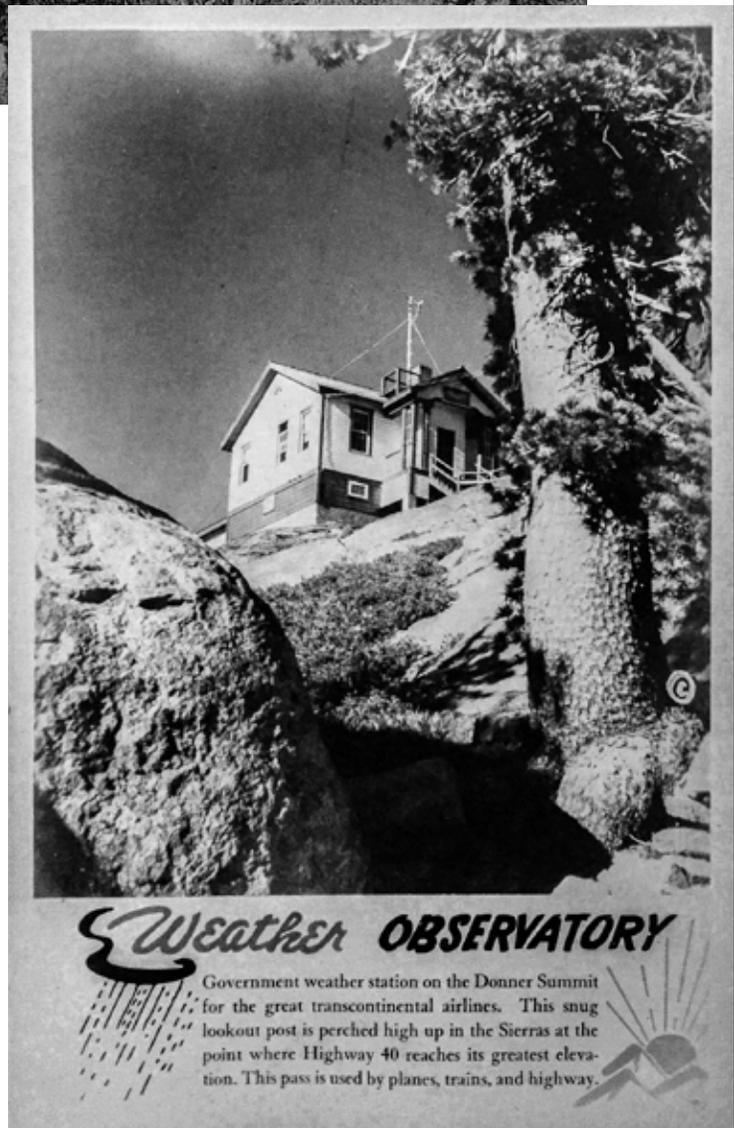




"Looks like Alaska but its California" postcard of Truckee, 1941



"Our path down town" postcard



Video Review

Mastering the Mountains

Placer County Museums, 10 minutes

The Placer County Archive is a repository of 30,000 historical photographs covering all of Placer County including Donner Summit. The Heirloom has used their photographs more than once. You can visit the archives to see their material – see below.

Recently the Placer County Museums staff decided to make the archives available to people who can't visit or don't know what to look for. They are planning a series of "ten-minute single subject videos" about Placer County history. The first one, "Mastering the Mountains" is now out. You can see it by going to YouTube and search for "Mastering the Mountains."

The short video is a wealth of pictures leading to and constructing the transcontinental railroad using Ken Burns techniques as the view pans around and zooms in and out of old photographs, modern scenery photographs, illustrations, and paintings. If you are familiar with the construction of the railroad you won't learn anything new but you'll enjoy the photographs. If you don't know much about the construction the video serves as a good introduction.

There are many pictures of the summit and good short summary of the building of the railroad over Donner Pass. The video covers, for example, Judah's miscalculations about snow not being a problem which of course, brings up snowsheds and the building of Tunnel 6 and its central shaft.

Placer County Museums publishes a bi-monthly newsletter about what's happening in the Placer County Museums. <https://www.placer.ca.gov/2489/Museums>. It was the November-December, 2019 issue that carried the announcement of Placer County Museum's first video and in that announcement article the thought process in developing the story was laid out.

It turns out producing an historical video requires a lot of thought first, "When you're dealing with an event that was a fight against seemingly insurmountable odds, it naturally begs to be made into a hero's journey. With that in mind, when you're pitting man and machine against rugged terrain and the terrain ultimately loses the fight, in some ways it makes the county itself the villain. Maybe not a villain like Darth Vader but definitely like the death star. Is that going to be okay?"

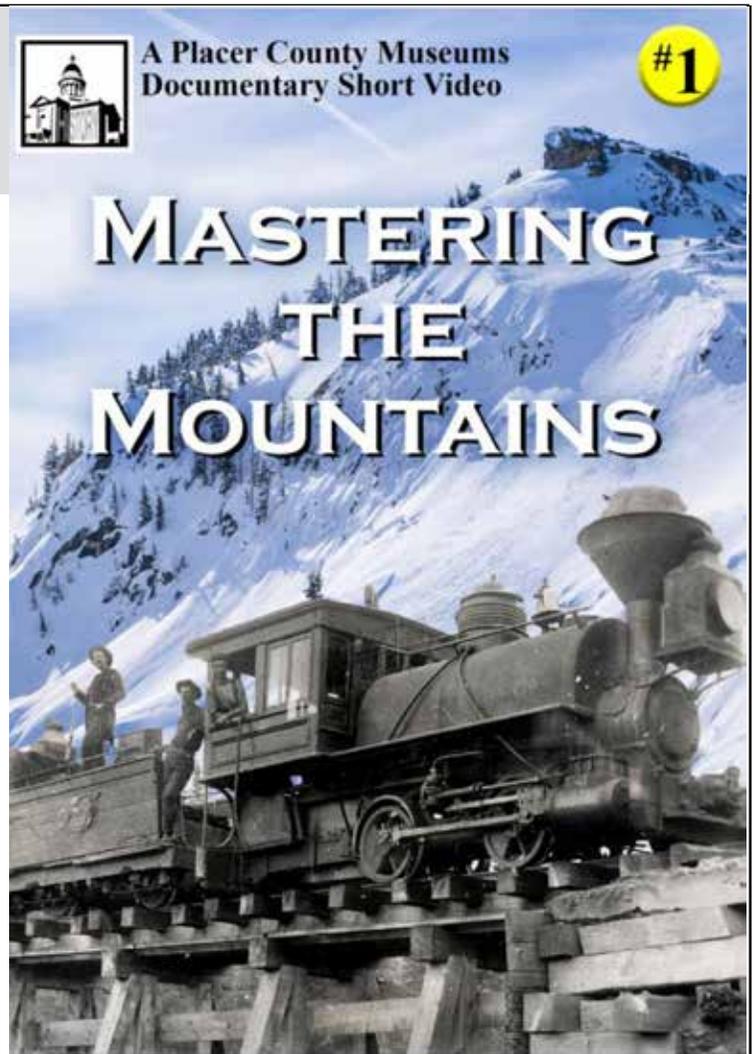
Well, yes, it turned out very okay. The video is well done and so we should all look forward to future offerings.

Placer County Museums has been "tinkering with the idea for some years" and everything came together during the sesquicentennial of the railroad in 2019. Everything about the video is done in house and they plan more, about one every 1.5 years. Ralph Gibson, Placer County Museums director says, "The first will be on the history of the DeWitt campus and the second will serve as an introduction video on the Gold Rush in our Gold Rush Museum." Ralph also says, " We have some smaller productions on our Youtube channel: www.youtube.com/placercountymuseums"



A Placer County Museums
Documentary Short Video

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Placer County's museums (i.e. the museums belonging to Placer County)

Placer County Archive is part of the Placer County Museums Division, open by appointment Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays 9AM – 3 PM 530-889-7789 museums@placer.ca.gov or kmonahan@placer.ca.gov The archives are a repository for thousands of records and old photographs.

Placer County Museum 101 Maple St, Auburn 10AM-4PM daily (that's the old courthouse building you can see from the freeway).

Bernhard Museum Complex 219 Auburn Folsom Rd. open Tuesday-Sunday, 11AM-4PM

Gold Rush Museum 601 Lincoln Wy. Auburn Thursday-Sunday 10:30AM-4PM

DeWitt History Museum 2985 Richardson Dr. Auburn Wednesdays, Noon-4PM

Mastering the Mountains

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lhk0pKKyMUg&t=1s> or go to YouTube and search for the title.

Note:

You have noticed our monthly book reviews. You might want to do some reading of your own.

Stop in at the DSHS. Norm Saylor has a large collection of books for perusing, buying, or checking out.

You might even want to do a review for us.

THE VICTIMS of THE AVALANCHE.— The Territorial Enterprise, February 4th, says: "We learn that the bodies of the unfortunate men who were buried by an avalanche on the Donner Lake route have not been recovered ; also some particulars in regard to the search that has been made. Up to Monday diligent search was made for the bodies over a wide space of ground, the snow being probed with long iron rods, hooked at the end, and tunnels being driven into the huge drifts at various points. Since the fall of snow on Monday no one has ventured to approach the spot, as another avalanche from the cliffs is momentarily expected to fall. So dangerous is this spot considered that a new road has been broken around it and out of reach of any slide that may come down. As all the stock belonging at the various stations in the vicinity has been pressed into the service of road breaking, the stages have been somewhat delayed, but will now come through. This dangerous spot is about one mile this side of the Summit. Those living in the vicinity do not think it possible for the bodies of the lost men to be recovered until the snow melts off in the Spring."

Marysville Daily Appeal,
Volume XI, Number 31, 8 February 1865

The Golden Snare

Truckee Republican 1/13/21

HARTFORD PICTURE CO. CONINT [sic] TO TRUCKEE This City Will Be Headquarters for a Period of Two Months

"Truckee will soon be the headquarters for the David M. Hartford Motion Picture company of Los Angeles. This fact was established when Joseph Montrose, representative of the company, returned south to report favorably on the various locations inspected.

"That this will mean much to Truckee is evinced by the fact that over 50 people will be added to the town's population for a period extending over six-weeks. Over 180 horses, and a large number of Alaskan dogs will be required in various scenes.

"Soda Springs will be the location used in the production of "The Golden Snare," a story by James Oliver Curwood. The scene of the story is supposed to be laid in Alaska, and a stretch of valley three miles long, surrounded by mountains is required. Such a spot has been found at Soda Springs near Lake Van Norden.

"Several men are there at present building a stockade to accommodate the animals required in the picture. The producers planned to film this picture in Colorado, but were forced to change their plans on account of there being insufficient snow there.

"There is at present three to four feet at Soda Springs, and about seven feet at Summit."

It turns out The Golden Snare is a book published in 1921 by James Oliver Curwood (112 pages). It is available at Amazon as a paper back for \$20. It can also be found for free at Project Gutenberg or various other e-book sources.

Summary: Philip Raine, a member of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police was on the trail of Bram Johnson who was wanted for murder. He was a "wild and untamed" man who commanded a pack of wolves. Bram had had a snare but then lost it. It was woven from the hair of a woman. How could the "half-human murderer" have a relationship with a woman who had such fine hair? Raine unravels the mystery as he tracks the man.

Maybe you'd like to review the book for the Heirloom since the movie version was filmed in Summit Valley.

We did go looking for the movie but it's not available apparently.

The Trouble on the Dutch Flat Route.*

A friend who arrived here on the 6th, by the Dutch Flat route, had his hands badly frozen in helping to hold a drag-chain to keep the stage from being blown over the road in a very severe snow-storm, four miles from this city. The out-going stage was blown over into a valley just as his stage came up. He expected that the papers here would have given a thrilling account of the mishap, but they—invertebrate punsters—joked over the affair, and called it A Washoe Zephyr!

This same name they have since, several times, applied to gales which blew houses over. The nether regions must be thickly strewed with just such zephyrs. Like Smith, the razor-strop man, I have just a few tufts of hair left, several of these balmy zephyrs having caught me and shorn me of my top-locks. Of course you know everybody is bald-headed here. "Dan DeQuille," of the Enterprise, being about the only exception in town. It naturally follows that he is the darling of the ladies in consequence.

Daily Alta California.

Volume 18, Number 5812, 7 February 1866

*The route over the Sierra and on to the Comstock using the Dutch Flat Rd. over Donner Summit.

Odds & Ends on Donner Summit

MEMORIAL CAIRN BUILT 1924 BY PM WEDDELL SAN JOSE



When summer comes and you're out hiking on the Judah Loop Trail or you're going up to Donner Pk., take a look at the little mound of rocks (above; that's Art Clarke there) just east of the yellow Emigrant Trail marker (right).

You will notice that there is faded paint on the largest of the rocks. The same rock, below, was photographed some years ago when the paint was a bit more legible. The message on the rock is at the top of the page here and "translated" on the next page by Art Clark. Peter Weddell was the first person to mark the Emigrant Trail from Verdi to Lake Mary on Donner Summit. He placed wooden signs along the route some of which are still on trees. The example to the right shows what his typical signs look like today (top) and what they look like after having gone through the DSHS MX-1000 Historical Rejuvenator (patent pending).



In 2017 the San Jose History Center took apart and scanned a display Weddell had put together of his map of the Emigrant Trail, pictures along the way, and diary entries illustrating the pictures. You can see that on page 22. Marshall Fey, eminent trail historian got those scans and shared them with us (see the July, '17 [Heirloom](#)). Here, to go with this Odds & Ends we have two of those pictures and their annotations so we really have a Then & Now of the Weddell marker. The old pictures (next page) are from 1920 and the new ones from just recently. Imagine what Mr. Weddell could have done with today's computers and layout software - and there would have been no need to destroy the display to share it. Maybe one day we can put it all back together digitally.



I BUILT THIS CAIRN OF ROCKS IN 1920. BETWEEN THOSE TWO TREES THE EMIGRANT TRAIL CROSSES THE SUMMIT OF THE SIERRA NEVADA.

...P. M. Weddell,
Location of the
Donner Family Camp,
1947.

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Above, below, and left are examples of Mr. Weddell's 1920's Emigrant Trail display (see next page) showing numbered captions and scanned pictures.

WE BEGAN THE ASCENT OF THE MAIN RIDGE, WHICH IS VERY STEEP AND ROUGH...THE SNOW-CAPPED PEAKS RISE IN MAJESTIC GRANDEUR...COVERED TO THEIR SUMMITS WITH TALL PINES AND FIR....

...Diary of Eliza Ann McCauley, Sept. 14, 1852.

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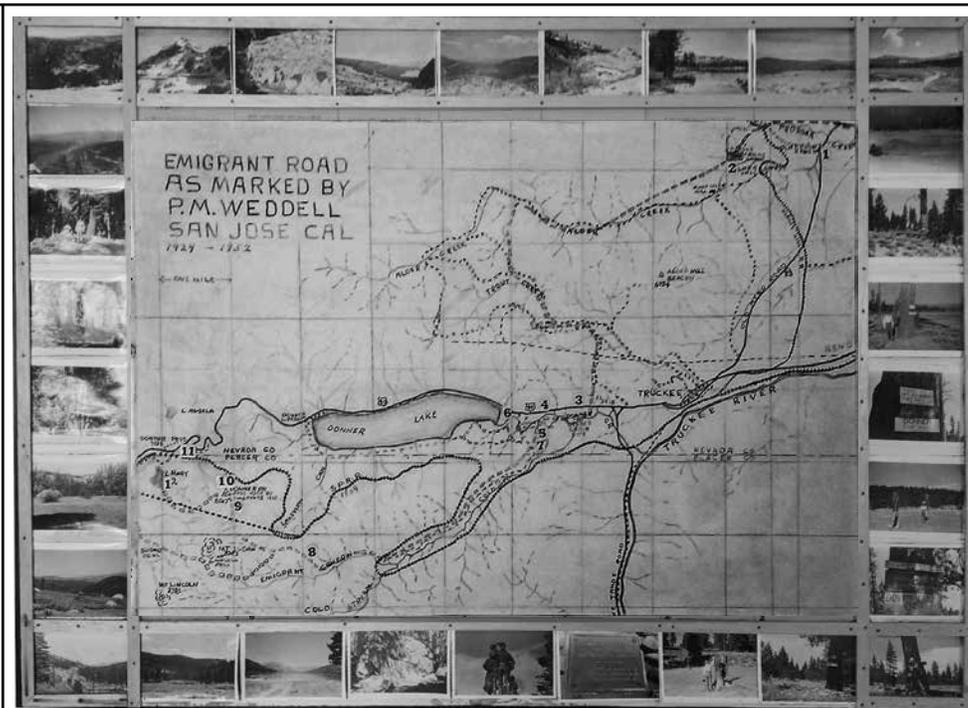


Note Castle Pk. in the background, right, above.
Left, the Weddell Cairn with expert decipherment by Art Clark.

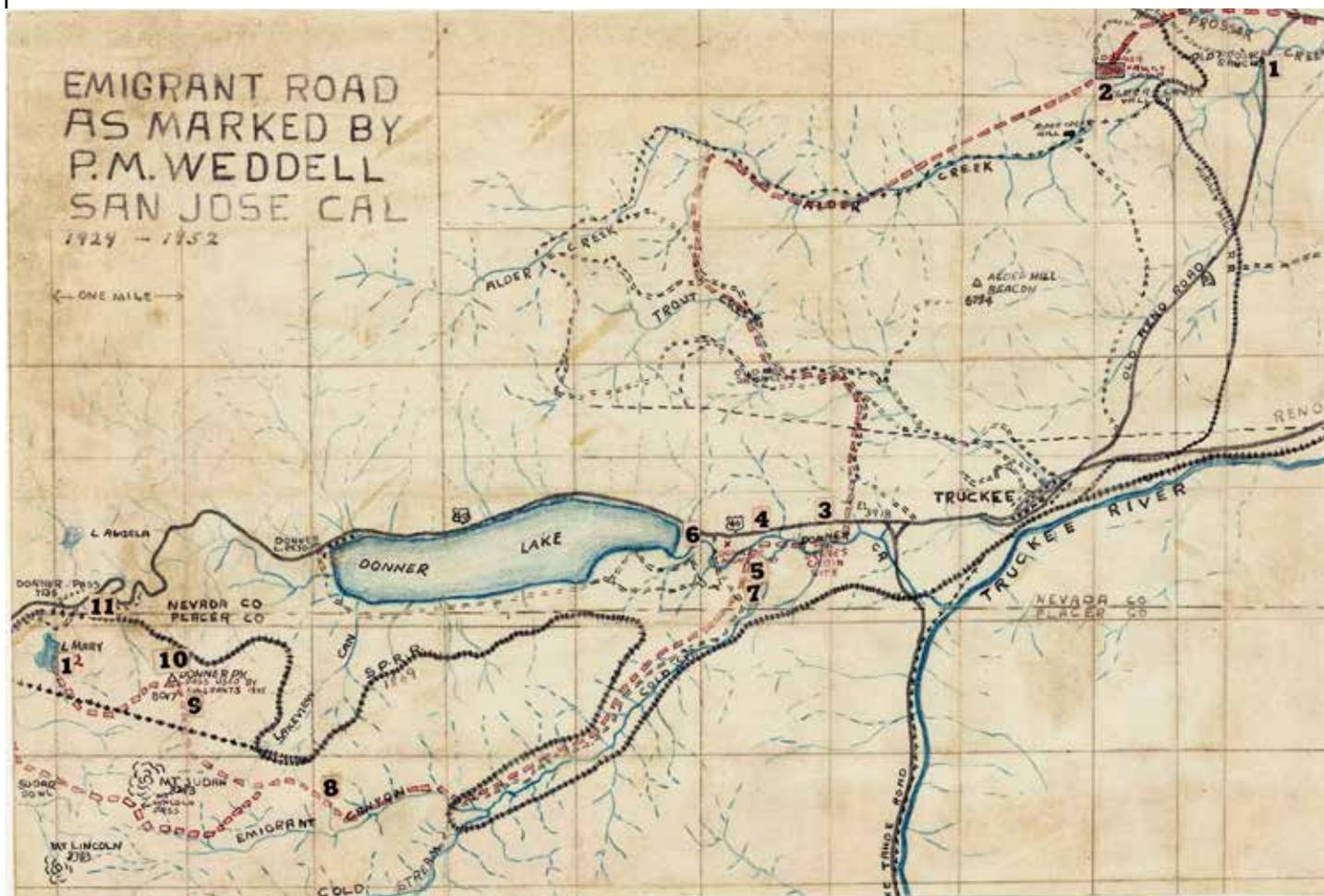
This is part of a series of miscellaneous history, "Odds & Ends" of Donner Summit. There are a lot of big stories on Donner Summit making it the most important historical square mile in California. All of those episodes* left behind obvious traces. As one explores Donner Summit, though, one comes across a lot of other things related to the rich history. All of those things have stories too and we've been collecting them. Now they're making appearances in the Heirloom.

If you find any "Odds & Ends" you'd like to share pass them on to the editor - see page 2

*Native Americans; first wagon trains to California; the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route, and telephone line, etc.



Peter Wedell's display of the Emigrant route from Prosser to Donner Summit in its original form until disassembled for scanning by the curator of the San Jose History Center. The captions, map and photos were held on by strips of wood. Each photo had a corresponding numbered caption that also matched the location numbers on the map. A color version of the map is below and you can see the locations of the pictures and captions.



Volunteer @ the Museum



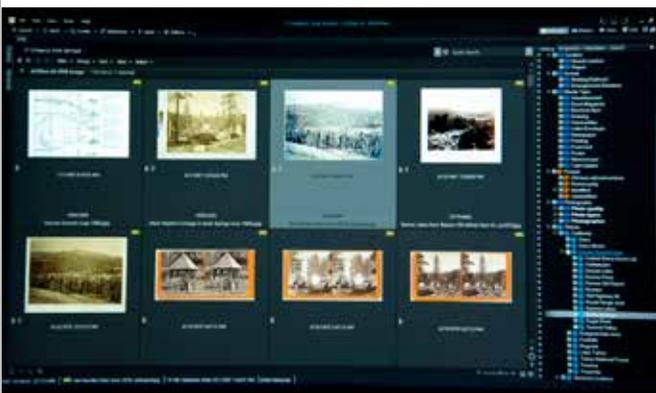
Norm Sayler's collection of historical photographs is made of up thousands of pictures currently filling dozens of binders (see below right). A few years ago we started digitizing the photographs for easier access as well as preservation. Recently George Lamson, left above, started constructing a database so that people can access Norm's pictures easily. While doing that he's been naming the pictures with information as well as tagging them with subjects. To the right, you can see a sample record for one postcard. Both the front and back have been digitized and Judy Lieb, above right, has been adding bits of information, many with Norm's help. That's the yellow "stickie."



George's job is coming to an end although we keep finding more photographs and have yet to digitize the large ones. Below you can see the interface of the database. People can scroll through but also do involved searches such as all pictures with "train" in the title on Donner Summit with snow and with people. The database user can either use search fields or check subject boxes. It seems to be pretty intuitive.

The next phase comes in two parts. One, we want to install some computers and monitors so people can look for history. We may add printers so copies can be made. Two, we need to add annotations to many of the pictures that George and Judy don't know. That will require people sitting with Norm, who does not do computers, and adding information to the database records

(typing in notes like the yellow "stickie" above, and checking boxes for subjects). If that is something you might like to help with starting this summer please let us know - email the editor (page 2).



Right, just some of Norm's binders



DONNER SUMMIT HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Donner Summit Historical Society.org

I/we would like to join The
Donner Summit Historical Society
and share in the Summit's rich
history.

DATE _____

NAME(S) _____

____ New Membership

MAILING ADDRESS _____

____ Renewing Membership

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

____ Individual Membership - \$30

(Please mail this card with your check payable to DSHS to Donner Summit
Historical Society, P.O. Box 1, Norden, CA 95724)

____ Family Membership - \$50

____ Friend Membership - \$100

____ Sponsor - \$250

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Donner Summit Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

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Take the Scenic Route: Donner Summit's Old Highway 40



Pick up the brochure at the DSHS
or download it at:
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/brochures.html>

50 interpretive signs along Old 40
<http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/20MileMuseum.html>